



How the
WOLF 
SURVIVES

When La Liga Teatro Elástico came to Chicago, they built a puppet parade to dramatize our ecological interdependence. *By* **CRYSTAL PAUL**





Wolves snap their jaws and arch low, preparing for the attack. But the deer they target is not simpering prey. It is brazen, bawdy, even taunting the wolves with a tilt of its antlers and a scuff of its hooves. A wolf lunges and is rebuffed. Another leaps and finds no purchase.

From the sidelines, exotic birds with brilliant ribbons woven in their wings look on as stunning silent witnesses.

This mesmerizing cabal of wild creatures is *La Bestias Danzan* or *The Beast Dance*, a puppet-beast ritual, dance, and story celebrating the role of the wolf in the natural ecosystem. On Jan. 20, interdisciplinary puppeteer troupe La Liga Teatro Elástico, founded by theatre artist and director Jacqueline Serafin and puppeteer and fabricator Iker Vincente, performed the show with six

intricate puppets crafted from bamboo, metal, and found materials, at the National Museum of Mexican Art, as part of the Chicago International Puppet Festival.

Standing or seated on the floor in front of a stage in the museum's performance hall, the audience crowded around flower-strewn altars bearing the disassembled puppets. The troupe drew the audience in with the slow beating of a drum, an echoing call-and-response, and, of course, haunting wolf howls, as they performed the ritual assembly of two of the six puppets. First presenting each piece to the crowd, they then tied and clipped them together and eventually hoisted the puppets—five wolves and one deer—onto their shoulders for a musical parade around the exterior of the museum, before returning to the performance hall for the show.

The real preparation for the performance began four days earlier in a classroom at Sherlock Elementary School in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, where the troupe worked with elementary school students to craft puppets from cardboard and paper, and at Columbia College Chicago's Fabrication Facility, where they taught adult students and other professional puppeteers their methods of creation. Unlike the marionette tradition, in which puppets are suspended by strings controlled by the puppeteer from above, La Liga's puppets dance high above their puppeteers' heads, having been mounted on their shoulders and secured by harnesses around their chests and waists.

This collaborative community work, explained La Liga's Vincente, is essential to the show. Not only is it the means by which they spread their environmental message and their unique puppet creation style; it is also a way to make the students and professionals they work with become a part of the show.

"Every wolf has its pack," said Vincente while taking a break from splitting bamboo and giving small lessons on puppet articu-

lation at the adult workshop.

Traveling all over the world for their performance, working in various environments, cultures, and languages, La Liga is nimble and adaptive. Much like the puppets, they use what's at hand to make their performance work, and much like the wolves they venerate in their performance, the company works together to overcome challenges as they arrive.

The January performance of *The Beast Dance* was no exception: Freezing temperatures in Chicago meant that their work with the kids at Sherlock Elementary ended after just one day. What was supposed to be a week-long workshop with the students, to teach them about the wolf and help them build their own bird puppets, was suddenly consolidated into a single three-hour session on the day of the performance on the 20th. And a later realization that the elevators at Columbia College are very small meant working with smaller and/or disassemble-able puppets.

Still, they adapted. What follows is a photographic journey of Chicagoans coming together around *The Beast Dance*.





The Assembly

Puppeteer, designer, and actor Jacqueline Wade stretches her neck out and curves it as she retracts it in a smooth motion.

“I want the head to move like this,” she says. “Not just up and down like this.”

All across the room at the Columbia College Chicago Fabrication Facility, arms are flying, stretched out like wings, wrists are bent to approximate beaks and heads, and hands are hard at work sketching, sanding, and chopping as participants dream up

the bird puppets they will build to join the *Beast Dance* performance a week away.

In just four days, the 16 workshop participants create four large bird puppets in the La Liga style, designed to fly above the puppeteer, and crafted from bamboo, metal rods, and found objects: scraps of ribbon, plastic bags. The birds will fly in a parade beside wolves and deer puppets, then take to the sidelines as La Liga performs a narrative dance honoring the wolf and its significance in the ecosystem as a whole.

While La Liga’s intricate *Beast Dance* puppets were created over six months in 2019, the workshop participants are guided from concept to the creation of simpler puppets in just four days. They all start with chalk drawings on butcher paper.

By the end, the diversity of talents and backgrounds among the participants shines through in the details.

In one group, Chicago fashion design student Emory Hammond crafts a sparkling eye, while Finnish theatre artist Anni

Suvanto lashes together bamboo rings to create a long pelican’s neck with full articulation.

“This is an opportunity to integrate the people from the different places and see this interaction and dialogue between objects that are made in just four days and objects we spent six months making,” says Vincente.

La Liga’s influence is clear not just in the materials that mark its signature puppet style—the bamboo and wire and crocheted

scraps—but in the creative solutions and adaptable nature of the process behind the puppets’ construction.

For example, Humberto Galicia, an original La Liga member, puppeteer, and go-to fabricator, speaks very little English. But this is hardly an impediment as he works with the mostly English-speaking workshop participants. In fact, it may be a boon: As he moves from group to group at the workshop, he uses sweeping gestures and makeshift constructions to demonstrate

the different ways these mechanical creatures might move and how the participants might construct them. The language difference forces the participants to get creative and use visuals and their bodies too.

When Galicia places a long roll of paper atop a thin pole to demonstrate how the puppet’s body could move up and down on a pole to make the wings “flap” in unison, it achieves what words cannot. Participant Cyndi Parr smiles brightly as understanding dawns.

Photos by Crystal Paul and courtesy of Chicago Puppet Theatre.



The Performance

In 1976 the Mexican wolf was listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and was soon thought extinct, killed off by hunters afraid for their livestock. Today, due to vigorous rescue efforts, there are now just over 240 known Mexican wolves. Their return brought with it a miraculous balancing of an ecosystem overrun and overgrazed by deer and other creatures.

This interdependence is what La Liga celebrates and calls attention to with *The*

Beast Dance.

“The wolf is very similar to the human being,” said Galicia in Spanish. “They live in herds; they protect each other. Everything is linked. Everything plays an important role in this ecosystem, and if one fails, it results in chaos.”

The ritual that begins the performance lays out the message in no uncertain terms. “Somos lobos!” shouts the ritual leader puppeteer Mario F. Davila. “We are wolves!”

“Wolf child!” he calls, and the rest of the puppeteers call back as they assem-

ble their wolves and deer. “Wolf parent!” “Beasts of the wild!”

After the puppets are assembled and mounted above the performers’ heads, the four birds crafted that week lead La Liga’s eight puppeteers and student “wolf packs” in a parade around the National Museum of Mexican Art. They dance in the streets and at a nearby playground, urged on by a brass band and unbothered by the snow and freezing temperatures. The wolves, deer (named Maxa by its handlers), and birds are in their element out of doors.

In the museum’s exhibit hall, the performance begins by continuing the joyful tone of the parade. The wolves circle Maxa, the deer, who bucks and taunts, then turns its back to the wolves and lets out a loud, tuba-worthy fart, reminding us that this is still a puppet show for the kids.

But the show doesn’t shy away from the brutal reality of nature. The crowd boos and gasps as one of the wolf pack lands the killing blow and the deer sags. A “wolf cub” is plucked from the crowd and mounted on Serafin’s shoulders to retrieve the “heart”

of the beast, which he opens up, showering bright red rose petals into the crowd.

Like the story of the Mexican wolf so far, *The Beast Dance* ends on a more joyful note than it began. After the heart-bursting ritual, the deer is revived, and the music is too. Howls echo off the walls amid a chorus of clacking cowrie shells, joyful shouts, and the plaintive whine of an accordion; streamers and cardboard wings fly among the wolves, wielded by dancing children in paper wolf hats. Puppeteers and puppets become nearly indistinguishable in

the confusion of streamers and bamboo and strings: a true beast dance.

“In the living world, everything is alive,” said Vincente. “This is the space to imagine about that. You share the life with the puppet. The bamboo is alive; it was green just some weeks ago. We are continuing its life. The puppet is a good place to think about life.”

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